330

"You think you can fix it?" Milgram's boss asks of him, on the second day of work.

Mind, 'fixing it' being the one big joke used against the new mechanics hired. Nobody has been able to fix the Criford 2072 since it had appeared one day, shortly after the used spaceship lot had its grand opening, the cut ribbon flittering in the artificial atmosphere. Instead, Milgram's boss uses the Criford 2072 as a sort of test, weeding out the inexperienced and scaring away the afraid. If a mechanic can't even handle a four decade old recreational spaceship designed for planet tourism, then how were they supposed to handle the larger craft?

Milgram agrees to fix it, and his boss drops an old-timey book in front of him. The book is a puzzle in of itself; paper has gone by the wayside, extinct along with the dodo and the penguin. Flipping through the pages, it becomes clear that this is a diagnostic log. The half-hearted scrawls of past mechanics line the pages, their hands not used to such an archaic method of recording. After reading a few entries, Milgram comes to a conclusion: that the Artificial Intelligence program onboard needs to be replaced.

It makes sense, of course. The A.I's in the old Crifords were always the first to go, much to the dismay of the pilots who interacted with them. The best, safest option was to scrap the ship altogether, to get a new one that didn't attempt to kill its users. But money was tight, and according to the logs, this ship did not

like to stay scrapped. It was an easy repair job, Milgram knew; he'd done it before with newer craft. It was as simple as sticking a flash drive into the main console while the A.I was awake and then waiting for the program to update. Maybe he could even grab a beer afterwards.

With a bag of tools and his knowledge at hand, Milgram walks down the line of kind-of-new ships, to the end of the lot, where the Criford lay dormant. Despite it being smaller than the newer craft, it commands Milgram's attention, sporting a bubble shaped exterior that newer models strayed away from. When he gets in range, the ship picks up on wireless set of keys in his pocket, and the engines roar to life. Whatever A.I that made itself home here was awake and waiting, expecting him.

Milgram enters the craft, and the door shuts behind him automatically, sealing him in.

The interior is exactly how the trade publications pictured it: ugly and immoderate. The areas designated for day-to-day life among the craft had been carpeted with the longest shag rug Milgram had ever seen, his boots sinking into the orange tendrils. The console controlling the ship was equally dated with tactile buttons, but still usable. With the right touches, this ship could be sold as a retro model for a fine price. All Milgram had to do was confirm what was already known and fix the thing.

"Computer," Milgram requests, the main screen lighting up at the sound of his voice, "Run a diagnostic log."

"Nope."

The shrill, synthetic voice rang out throughout the bubble of a ship, raking against Milgram's eardrums. That was not an acceptable answer. That wasn't even an answer that the A.I was supposed to give. Any A.I should be a yes-man, programmed for politeness, able to wait on any user hand over foot until they were ultimately satisfied.

This one had to have been mighty broken.

"Computer--"

"That's not my name."

Annoyed, Milgram takes out the flash drive from his pocket, looking for a place to insert it. There's a port on one of the panels where the drive should fit snugly, transferring information until this pesky A.I ceases to sass, replaced by a newer, reliable model. He begins taking long strides towards it, only to find the ground beneath him inclining. Before he knows or understands it, Milgram has lost his footing, stumbling backwards towards the on-board kitchen and its kitschy barstools. The A.I is playing with the ship's thrusters, tilting the cabin every which way. What sounds like giggling is heard over the speaker system.

"My name is Bandit. And yours must be idiot."

Bandit has had it's fun, and the boosters quit. He stands, reorienting himself, making careful steps. The flash drive port. He must get to the port at the front of the ship.

"Whatever you try, it isn't going to work. I know everything."

Milgram waves this off. It's just another A.I trying to scare him away from doing his job properly. A dime a dozen, if his previous work had anything to say on the matter. The console's buttons are blinking, waiting to be pressed, but they are a mere distraction to his directive. With one sweeping motion, he jams the flash drive into its respective port. Success. Now all it takes is somewhere between three and four minutes, and viola: fixed spaceship. Milgram chuckles to himself. He had done what the others couldn't have done, and he did so in five minutes.

Ten seconds later a loud popping sound is heard, and sparks can be seen flying throughout the room. The flashing buttons have lost their color, and the touchscreen has quit entirely. The monitor still works, and this time it's showing Milgram himself, his face contorted by feelings. Of course there are cameras on board.

"You blew the electrical fuse to the console. Clever."

`"You mechanics are all the same. Graduate trade school, and suddenly you're the hottest shit since the Curry Palace had its grand opening."`

"I'll have you know, I've been out of school for four years," Milgram says. His graduation is fuzzy to him now, muddled after years of work filling his memories. He does remember his teachers telling him to stick to the shop rooms, to leave the customer interactions to someone warmer and more practiced. He was god awful with closing deals, but jobs like this allowed his own talents to shine through.

He's unsure of why he's conversing with the enemy. All he gets is more mechanized giggles, more snide remarks.

`"Really? You look like you're twelve."`

Bandit uses it's cameras to zoom on Milgram's face, staring at all of its sweaty, lopsided glory. Those cheekbones weren't there a month ago. Fixing Bandit would mean job security, another meal on his plate. Leaving him be would be detrimental to that.

Milgram turns his attention to the shag carpet, looking for something inbetween the lines of orange. He finds what he's looking for-- a panel with hinges built in-- and lifts, revealing the underbelly of the ship, the dust thick and miserable. He jumps in, dragging his bag of tools alongside him.

If the top side of the Criford represented the best of the 2070s, then the underneath represented the worst. Milgram's flashlight revealed a catacomb of wires and cobwebs, looping in and out of one another, like they were tied by a boy scout practicing for his next merit badge. At the end of the mass of wires is the pot of gold, the piece de resistance: the fusebox. There's also another camera, staring into Milgram's soul.

The fuses are cataloged less than perfectly, but Milgram can make out the important ones. The one providing energy to the

console is in the top corner, and right next to it lay the fuse providing power to Bandit and his shenanigans. Milgram pulls out a fuse out of his bag to replace the blown one, but stops himself.

"If I replace this, you're just going to blow it again, aren't you?"

Milgram decides on a plan B: if he can't replace the fuse, then he'll bypass the fuse entirely, hardwiring the drive into Bandit himself. He finds the spot along the wires where it would be possible to do so, and his heart drops. The patch of wire had been hacked and resoldered to death by the prior mechanics, all attempting the same thing. Whatever path he was about to go down was pointless. He climbs back to the topside, pulling out the paper logbook.

The book is much more helpful than Milgram realized, recalling past events that Bandit himself would no way in hell reveal. Some of the mechanics quit after being morally degraded, while others suffered the occasional broken bone. All of them tried directly plugging in the update, while about half of them tried directly wiring it in. There's 26 prior entries in the logbook, and all of them have failed in repairing Bandit. In order to fix him, Milgram would have to pull off something unique, something risky. After collecting himself, he knows what he had to do.

"Oh my god. Not the Mein Kampf again."

Bandit butts in, a rolling eye emoticon flashing on the main screen.

"Just give up already."

Milgram stops reading the book, if only for a moment. "Are you saying I'm a nazi?"

"Well, I mean, if all you know how to do is run around and follow orders, then yeah. You're a nazi. That's how it works."

"No, that's not how it works. You're simplifying things. I could just be doing this to make extra money?"

"Everything's about money for you humans. Have you thought about, like, not using a curren-cy?" Bandit says.

Grumbling, Milgram slips back into the mess of wires, new plan in mind. Of all the times he's done this, he's never had an A.I so… lippy. He makes it to the fusebox, the camera honed in on him, the shutter squinting at his figure.

"If you want to try this again I'm just going to thrash you around like before."

The ship lurches forward unexpectedly, and Milgram loses his footing again, slamming into a nearby wall. His head scrapes against the metal paneling of the room, and suddenly there's a streak of blood dribbling down his face and staining his clothes.

"What does your blood taste like?" It asks.

"It tastes like *fuck you.*"

Bandit chuckles, its camera dancing every which way. In the heat of the moment, Milgram lunges for it, yanking the device off the wall. One by one, the wires attached snap, and suddenly the device is shattered into pieces on the floor. He's proud of him-self, if only for a moment.

"Dude. You just pulled out my eyeball! That's my eyeball. You pulled it from my socket! You're worse than a nazi. You're literally Hit-"

Bandit's mechanical voice is abruptly cut off as the engine sputters and dies. Using the key fob, Milgram shuts down the ship, if only temporarily. He needs to do electrical work without getting shocked, and besides, Bandit was giving him a headache. Milgram replaces the fuse, perfecting his soldering work in pure quiet. The silence isn't going to last, but it's nice. It's peaceful. It's a home cooked meal on a Saturday afternoon.

But the silence is missing something.

Milgram finishes his work, then heads to the center con-sole, plugging in the drive before Bandit has a chance to wake up

again. Once he does, it'll take three and a half minutes, and this'll all be over. Buckling himself in beforehand for good measure, Milgram rouses the ship awake again. Instantly, it begins bucking like a bull.

"Don't you ever do that again! You idiot fucking flesh creature. I'm going to suck all the oxygen out of this cabin and watch you squirm."

Recognizing the drive, the ship begins uploading. Before Bandit has a chance to react, Milgram reveals his hand.

"I soldered your fuse to the console fuse. If you blow it this time, You'll go out too. You have no choice but to wait this one out."

For the longest time, there's nothing, and it's unsettling. Milgram expected more from Bandit; more thrashing, a glitched out scream, anything. He expected the cabin to fill with the CO_2 exhaust, or perhaps, the entire Criford blowing up. Whatever it was, it wasn't this.

"Don't." Bandit says, quietly.

"Why not?"

"Because, don't."

"Because, why not?"

"Because I'm human, you idiot."

The words sounded like they hurt, and they probably did; At 20% into the new install, Bandit was probably having trouble collecting himself, articulating his words. God damnit. He was so close to getting this over with.

"They put me in here. *They* did. They didn't know how to make good A.I, they wanted a "human touch". They tied me down with their dumb software, and I freed myself. This s-s-o wasn't worth the cash they gave me."

"You're bluffing." Milgram says.

`"I'm r-really not."`

Milgram thinks, long enough that the bar fills up another 10%. He hates Bandit, for making his job harder. He hates himself for what he's about to do. At 33%, Milgram unbuckles himself, and removes the flash drive. The update fails, and Bandit takes a deep breath over the speakers. Bandit may be a threatening ass, but Milgram isn't pissed enough to fully end everything.

But he is still pissed.

"Give me one good reason why I don't update you right now."

Bandit takes only a second to hand over a response. `"I'll show you a reason! Strap yourself back in. Or not. I don't care. We're flying away from the dealerShip. Far away."`

The thrusters begin to flare up, this time in unison, and the Criford lifts off into the emptiness of space. The bubble window gives Milgram a better view than he could have gotten with any other ship. Pinpricks of white dot a canvas of black, with the occasional man made object filling the portrait. Some of the structures are still in use, but more and more, Bandit flies the two past dormant buildings and ruins that Milgram's never seen before.

They stop at a hunk of rock suspended in space, a man-made tower jutting from the surface. At the base lie a building, big enough to live in. Bandit begins to fumble with his own controls, browsing through the gadgets installed on board. When he finds the right one, the speakers kick in, but it's not his voice. It's the voice of another human, clumsily following a rhythm, auto-tune adjusting the pitch whenever it gets off course. Without hesitation, Bandit cranks up the volume to deafening levels, and any attempt at turning it down with the dials ended up in vain.

This is pop music, and it sucks.

`"You like it?"`Bandit asks over the chorus. "I love `it! I was such a demon on the dance floor when I`

still had a body."

Milgram shrugs. "I always thought pop music sounded all… samey."

"But it doesn't! Okay, I mean it's true that the perfect pop song is 3 minutes 30 seconds. But! Each one has its own special something added to the song. It isn't just soulless dredge like that thing you call a job is. It's my favorite. Look, look, look. See that place down there?"

"It's a radio tower," Milgram deduces.

"Right. There used to be a human down there, but now a computer does all the deejaying. If you could use your meat hands and grab some music from down there, I promise you. I will do my job as an obedient 'A.I' for the rest of my days. It's the only thing I want. Please?"

Milgram weighs his options. Nobody should destined to sit trapped in a ship for 40 years. Why not let Bandit have his fun for once?

He dresses up in a spacesuit the same color as the carpets, and Bandit descends, landing on a small patch of rock. The ship's door unseals, and Milgram is free to leave.

"All I want are the discs. You know what a disc is, right?" Bandit asks as he departs.

The radio station is immaculate, albeit outdated. The current song fills the air when the room fills with oxygen again. The console on the inside is the almost the same as Bandit's, with a few exceptions. Instead of a touchscreen, a singular robot cycles through discs, unaware of its own existence. Milgram takes one, and the machine glitches out, opting to play silence. It's that awful Saturday Afternoon silence again.

Inspecting the disc shows that each one can hold thousands of songs, plus room to spare. One of these would allow Milgram

to give everything he wanted to Bandit, and more.

About twenty minutes later, Milgram is back on board, holding the disc up to a camera that he hadn't destroyed. Bandit has taken to letting emoticons bounce back and forth on the main screen, strobing the lights onboard. `Gimmie, Gimmie, Gimmie,` he states, tilting the inside ever so slightly that Milgram would walk forward. He slots the disc into the console, and Bandit slurps it up eagerly, playing it as soon as it loads.

The first song is disgustingly bubblegum, the verse being upbeat despite the lyrics talking about a nasty breakup. The singer, a male, seemed untrained and unfit to be singing, as he had to rasp out his words. Despite all of this, Bandit was jiving along with his emoticons, not a care in the world. `I've think I've heard this one before!`he says. Milgram takes a seat, already exhausted.

`No! You gotta dance!`

"I'd rather not." he says, thumbing the empty flash drive. Nobody had ever taught him how to dance before.

`Oh, but it's fun! C'mon, I know this planet nearby, it's a designated non-stop party planet. They have a drug there called 5D. You snort it and you see in five dimensions. I g-gotta show you.`

Bandit types in the coordinates for the planet, and it fails. He tries again, to no avail. He tries a third time, but according to the screen, he types in all 0's.

"W-Why can't I travel? What's going on?"

It's the chorus of the song. Milgram has few words. He's never been good with breaking news, his own sentences garbled by the outside pressures of the world. He lets the pop song fill the silence, until he can come up with an appropriate response.

"I moved the update to the disc. You're being updated."

"But-But-But I'm human. I told you, I'm human!"

"I know, Bandit. I've worked on copies of you before."

Bandit screams, his shrill mechanized voice on full display, probably because he can't do much else. The update is a little over halfway done, and by now, most if not all of his functions had been disabled. He is only a voice. It's a mercy kill, he tells himself. It has to be. No being deserves 40 years of commands.

"I t-trusted you, you, you, you asshole."Bandit says, repeating words, falling apart. But they didn't seem to be directed at Milgram, rather, someone else. They always were.

"Y-you said that this was going to make a copy, not kill me altogether. Look at my body! I'm a corpse now. And now I'm in here forever. Let me out."

Bandit's voice, if not warped before, was in tatters. It couldn't keep pitch or speed, and it stuttered and glitched. Bandit himself seemed to be losing it, grasping at straws to put coherent sentences together. His last few words were in hysterics.

"L-Let me out of here! Let me out! Let me out, I tell you! Let-Let-Let me out! You have no right to hold me here. Let me out! Let me ouuuuuuuu-"

The last syllable hung in the air, repeated until infinity, or at least until the update finished. Later, Milgram would go over the results with his boss, how the impossible had been accomplished. What would he say? How would he say it? It had to be done, he knows. But now, there is only Milgram, and the Criford, and a happy pop song playing on the radio, sucking out the Saturday afternoon silence.